

Things They Knew for a Short While, Once. Mark Gardner



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My ninth graders took a vocabulary quiz the first week of school—twenty words drawn from our short story unit (paroxysm, ascetic, duress...). Multiple choice. Matching.

Data point one.

Then when we finished *To Kill a Mockingbird* in November, another vocabulary quiz. Twenty words from Harper Lee's expansive prose (assuaged, austere, temerity...). Multiple choice. Matching.

Data point two.

I sat there with my Excel spreadsheet of student data, that mishmash of numbers representing the learners I had come to know for the first twelve weeks of my Freshman Lit and Comp class. In the end, the kids who did well on that first test, no surprise, did well on the second. The same was true for the other end. I had data in front of me that, in my mind, proved what I had wanted to believe all along: "data" means nothing.

As an English teacher I have long railed against the quantification of what my students do. I cannot distill down a student's essay into a string of countables: how many adjectives they use, how many proper uses of semi-colons, how many this or that. Countables are not what I want from writers. I want them to be able to take a thought and expand it into a fully fleshed argument with supporting details in 1000 words, or to extract its essence in a single, economical sentence that makes a reader's jaw drop.

Yet, my student growth goal is "Students will improve vocabulary scores during the first 12 weeks of instruction."

Compliance.

When I was faced with the charge to track and document student growth, this charge was presented in terms of concise SMART goals with percentages and neatly packaged little quantities. During the time that I was going through this shadow dance with student data, I knew it was not useful to me. I could not have cared less about my students' vocabulary grades. I truly was indifferent (list 2, word #5). This data meant nothing to me, nothing to them. When I presented my students with their data and the question about how they might improve, the solution was simply that they needed to make better flash cards and work on memorization and recall.

Memorization and recall: Not why I became an English teacher. No one looks back on their education and lovingly recalls that one teacher who required them to memorize words and definitions—but nothing else.

That vocabulary scores that were supposed to serve as a proxy for all the learning taking place in my class simply left me feeling like I was missing the mark horribly. In hindsight, I had built my vocabulary tests for the sake of building vocabulary tests to gather data. Yet, vocabulary data not only failed to represent what my teaching looked like, it also failed to represent all

the amazing things my students were doing in my class. I don't remember a single time I burst into the staff lounge to share with my colleagues the exciting thing a kid did on a multiple choice vocabulary test. Instead, I was always excited to share about what they wrote, built, said, shared... not what they "knew."

This realization flashed like a neon sign at what I needed to do. I needed to focus not on measuring what I my students know. Instead, I realized I needed focus on what I want my students to be able to do with what they know.

That, I realized, not memorization and regurgitation, was what I cared about. All I had to do was stop and reflect on the things I've been saying for years to my own students: "No one's going to care if you can list the characters from Romeo and Juliet for a job interview someday, but they will care whether you can draw inferences, support your claims, interpret a challenging text."

These, obviously, are the enduring understandings and skills. These are what I've been teaching all along. So why, when asked to show my students' growth, did I choose to use vocabulary test scores?

The answer is simple. To my overwhelmed teacher brain, "gathering data" was just another thing I had to do. When I have "one more thing" to do, the focus becomes on how to do that one thing in the quickest, least difficult way so that it does not get in the way of the other, more important work. To me, student growth data was a task to be completed and filed. It was a waste of my time.

What I knew was not a waste of my time was helping my students be better writers and thinkers. That was what I actually wanted to do, and to be fair to myself, had been doing all along.

Could I line up a student's writing samples from September to June and talk about how their thinking-through-writing improved? Absolutely. Why couldn't that count as evidence of student growth? In my narrow perception of how to represent growth, improvement in writing couldn't function to show growth because it lacked the kind of quantification possible with a vocabulary test.

But I was so wrong—not about writing being quantified, but about the premise that growth can only be shown through countables and quantification. The reality: yes, lining up a student's writing samples from September to June leads to a far better illustration of student growth than my gathering of countable data. Further, I needed to stop associating "data" with counts and numbers, and recognize that "data" simply means information. What information about my students as writers can I gather throughout the year in order to show their improvement as writers?

Grades? I talked myself out of that. I want a kid to be able to earn an "A" in September and still have room to grow and improve. A string of "A's" in the gradebook doesn't mean the kid didn't grow. My next thought: how does an "A" in September's writing look different from an "A" in June's?

This was a harder question, but one I knew I needed the answer to.

“No one's going to care if you can list the characters from Romeo and Juliet for a job interview someday, but they will care whether you can draw inferences, support your claims, interpret a challenging text.”



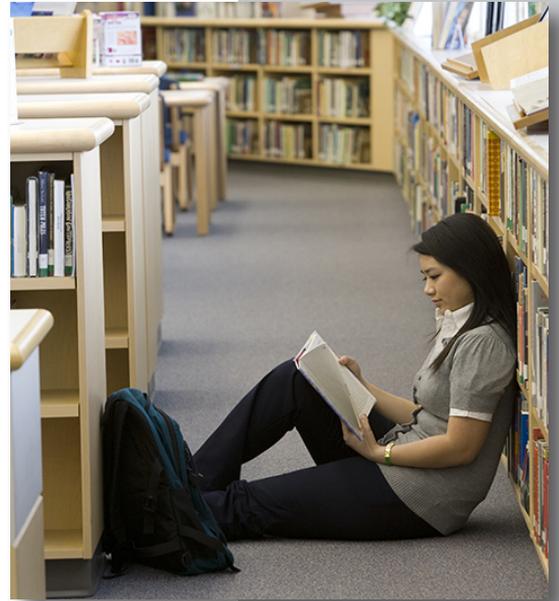
And this is when I started to feel a transformation in myself as a professional. I had never, in a dozen years of teaching high school English, ever stopped to consider how an “A” in September must be different from an “A” in June... and the same for all other letter grades. I realized : my whole career had been about marching kids through a series of isolated experiences utterly disconnected from one another. I had been a tour guide pointing at poetry here, novels there, a research project down the road, without really considering how connected everything is and ought to be. In my curriculum the easiest connection to explore was writing, and for the first time in my career I started to really wonder what change I expected to see in my students’ skills during the time they spent in my room.

Suddenly I found myself in a position to gather “data” (hereafter “information,” since I still can’t shake my aversion to that term) about my students as writers—and I quickly realized that gathering growth data, I mean, gathering change information about student writing, is a whole lot more time consuming, complicated, and subjective than a closed-ended multiple choice vocabulary test. No wonder I went down that route on the first attempt.

There was a long, convoluted process by which I honed my assessment literacy skills, streamlined my writing cycle feedback processes, and the details of this involve harvesting many workshops and book studies for grains of useful practice. Ultimately though, two examples of my progress from treating student growth as an act of compliance to an act of professionalism are worth mentioning.

First, I realized that I needed to create a tool that could function not only to assess student writing but also communicate my expectations as well. Along with my Professional Learning Community, I built my own performance level criteria scale (aligned to a couple of Common Core State Standards) by simply imagining the learning progression I would expect to see over the course of the year. Rather than using a scale that talked about “never,” “sometimes,” and “always,” or other degree of adjective, I focused on describing what student work typically looks like on entry, what it looks like as skills emerge, and what it looks like when students achieve, and then exceed, my expectations. Instead of focusing on, for example, what is missing for a piece of work to get a certain level, I deliberately crafted proficiency descriptors that articulate what is present.

For example, a work of analytical writing at the very beginning will “summarize key main ideas from a text and makes a general statement about these ideas.” In September, most kids can do this. By mid-year, I expect greater proficiency, and students will “identify text evidence that supports a main idea and articulate how that text supports the main idea.” To show high level proficiency by the end of the year, students will “provide a subjective inference not otherwise presented in class and use a pattern of text evidence to illustrates support, followed by a commentary that deconstructs the evidence to articulate how its parts support the inference and connect to larger themes in the text.” I realized that all year long I’d be asking students to support analysis with evidence (which the scale above addresses, in part). When I turned my proficiency descriptors into a 1-to-4 scale and started tracking, I realized that the most fair way to evaluate student progress was not just to look at their first and last attempts. Instead, I looked at mode scores. By comparing the mode of their first three samples to the mode of the last three samples—all measured using the same proficiency scale—I felt like I was able to ascertain whether real growth and change had taken place.



Second, I empowered my students to be the ones doing the work. Once I designed that scale and spent a little time training my students to understand it, it was no longer mine—it was theirs. One watershed moment came during a class discussion where I had passed back a writing sample and charged students with reflecting on their growth. I asked for a show of hands:

“How many of your scores went down?”

One hand.

“Why did your score go down?” I asked.

The response: “My topic sentence was just a statement of fact.”

“And why did that bring your score down?”

The student’s reply: “To get a ‘3,’ the topic sentence has to be an opinion, or subjective. This one, I just said Scout was a little girl.”

My next query: “How many of your scores stayed the same?” About a quarter of the class raised their hands. “Good, good,” I said. “Who had a score that went up?” Nearly three quarters of the class raised their hands. “Keep your hand up if you can tell me why your score went up?”

To this, Matt said: “I got a ‘2’ last time, so when I wrote this time, I just looked at what I needed to do to get a ‘3,’ so I did that.”

“And it worked because...?” I probed.

He finished, “Because it says right there what I needed to do.”

I admitted to the class that I wished I could have captured that moment on camera to go in my evaluation. They laughed.

What a change from when I asked them to reflect on their vocabulary quiz scores, and the only way to improve was to memorize things better so they could know them long enough to take the test. With my scale and my focus on growth, kids knew that it wasn’t just about memorizing, it was about doing something. With my scale, it was clear that my students better understood what it was they were supposed to do.

That was last year. The failed attempt at working the system with vocabulary test data was the year before that. This year, I entered the school year with new focus and energy around monitoring and tracking student growth information. I now use a refined proficiency scale not just as an assessment tool, but as a teaching tool, and as a guide by which students can record their own progress and evaluate their own needs. It is not perfect—no assessment instrument is—but it helps both the students and me describe how their writing has improved over time. This matters to me. This is why I became an English teacher— to help them think more critically and communicate more effectively. This is what I cultivate. This is what grows in my classroom.

So it only makes sense that this is the growth I focus on, not because some new law on teacher evaluation tells me I have to, but because it is what I actually want for my students.

Watch Mark’s video... <http://tpep-wa.org/student-growth-case-studies>

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